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ABSTRACT

The diverse student population which characterizes most community colleges requires that its professors recognize new techniques for teaching communication skills to disabled learners. This paper offers junior college instructors in the content areas some techniques for improving the reading skills of their students and includes suggestions for assessing students' reading concerns and abilities, for presenting material and assignments clearly, and for helping students to acquire the necessary reading skills to complete assignments. Examples are provided of a reading and study skills attitude survey, of a cloze test for assessing reading ability, and of teaching techniques which use vocabulary, survey of text format, questions, and paraphrases. (KS)

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Teaching Reading Skills in the Community College Class Room

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CS 003 176

The rapidly expanding junior college movement in the United States attracts a variety of students with widely divergent abilities and interests. However, an alarming number of these students may be considered disabled learners, and many junior colleges experience a high failure rate. In order for this trend to be reversed, junior colleges must recognize that many student failures can be traced to deficient reading skills and that these skills can best be developed and improved during the regular classroom period.

Although there are notable exceptions, the typical community college attempts to emulate conventional four year college programs. This is unfortunate because most four year colleges accept students who have already demonstrated their ability to survive and succeed in more traditional programs. If the community college plans to offer an alternative style of higher education, then it only perpetuates a disservice to a high percentage of its students by adopting the goals and teaching methods of four year colleges.

The unique position of community colleges requires that its professors recognize new techniques of teaching communications skills to disabled learners. The authors assume that most students presently enrolled in junior colleges can learn. However, many failures occur because poor reading techniques seriously hinder the student's intellectual growth. This article offers junior college instructors some techniques for improving the reading skills of their students, snd this improvement in turn should enable more students to succeed.

Many college professors think that they are not responsible for their students' reading failures and that they, as academicians, possess neither the time nor the expertise to teach college level reading skills. This dilemma is soluable. Readings skills are taught most effectively by the professor in the regular classroom situation. Each discipline has evolved its own vocabulary, special nuances of meaning, unique structures, and styles of writing. The instructor is qualified to make these known to the student and such instruction can be continuous. Professors from all disciplines need to be reading teachers.

Professors must assess the reading capacities of every student. This is primary and must occur at the beginning of the quarter before formal instruction in the discipline begins. The professor must objectively stand back and ask these questions.

1. Can the student read the syllubus?
2. Can the student read the textbook?
3. Can the student read the assigned research readings?
4. Can the student use the library effectively?

These are areas of concern. One must ask, is the student merely reading words without grasping the main ideas and concepts? Is the student moving his eye across the pages of print without understanding, let alone, remembering what he has read?

One method of assessing student backgrounds and determining individual needs involves the written interview or informal questionnaire. The questionnaire can inclu'e standard information such as age, marital status, high school background, work record, and reasons for taking the course. In the interview or open-ended questionnaire, the student can be asked how he perceives his reading and study skills and how he assesses his motivation. The informal nature of this procedure reduces the likelihood of emotionally restricted responses and is not intimidating.

Another technique for assessing the student is the checklist. The following is an example of the type that may be used:

> [1]If you are concerned about keeping up with heavy reading assignments or about studying for this course in general, please complete the following checklist to help us help you.
>
> Many people who are dissatisfied with their reading and study habits name one or more of the following factors as part of their problem. Please check the items below which you think apply to you, and add any additional factors which seem significant to you. (Leave the line blank if an item is not a factor in your case.)

	Major factor	Minor factor
concentration		
slow rate of reading		
inflexible rate of reading		
reading comprehension		
retention of information		
notetaking		
college curriculum		
college instruction		
self-image as poor reader		
lack of self-confidence		
lack of willpower		
lack of motivation		
organizing work		
vocabulary		
coping with present environment		
pressures from home		
uncertainty about goals		
tension when reading		
procrastination		
negative attitude toward reading		

After surveying the backgrounds, experiences, and reading concerns of each student, one can then informally assess both the individual and the collective reading abilities of each class. Several techniques are available, but one of the simplest to administer is the cloze test procedure. This technical jargon should not worry you; the cloze test can be developed by chemists, artists, and philosophers, as well as by experienced reading teachers.

To construct a cloze test, begin by selecting a representative passage, approximately fifteen hundred words in length from your text or assigned readings. Next, choose two sections of the article, one from the beginning and the other from the end. Type these sections of the cloze test deleting every fifth word and replacing it with a standard length blank. Use twenty-five deletions in each section to facilitate scoring, and reproduce enough copies of the original article and both cloze tests for each student.

[2]Kahn, Norma B., "A Student Checklist," "Journal of Reading", May 1972 pg. 623

In class, instruct the students to read the original passage at their normal speed, but inform them that their comprehension will be evaluated. As soon as the student has finished the complete passage give him the two cloze sections from the passage and have him fill in the deleted words without looking back at the orginal.

The following is an example of material used in a psychology course:

> [3]Physiologist Ivan Pavlov conducted the first systematic studies of classical conditioning over 60 years ago. After observing dogs salivate when their food was brought to them, Pavlov demonstrated that they would learn to salivate to a previously neutral stimulus such as a bell, sounded a moment before the arrival of the food (Pavlov, 1927). Originally the stimulus food produced the response salivation. After many trials during which the buzzer was sounded prior to the presentation of food, the buzzer became the stimulus for salivation. The salivation response occurred involuntarily--the dog could not control its salivation. This process, in essence, is classical conditioning.
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> Physiologist Ivan Pavlov conducted the first systematic studies of classical conditioning over 60 years ago. After observing dogs salivate _____their food was brought_____them, Pavlov demonstrated that _____would learn to salivate_____a previously neutral stimulus _____as a bell, sounded_____moment before the arrival_____ the food (Pavlov, 1927). Originally the _____ food produced the response_____. After many trials during_____the buzzer was sounded _____to the presentation of_____, the buzzer became the_____ for salivation. The salivation_____occurred involuntarily--essence, is_____conditioning.

Scoring the cloze test is a simple matter. The student merely counts the number of his correct responses. A response is counted as correct only if the exact deleted word used in the selection is recorded. Caution--synonyms do not count; the test calls for the exact word. Once the correct number of responses is tabulated, the score is converted into percentages. For example, if the student recorded twenty correct responses out of the fifty possible responses, the student would receive a percentage score of 20/50 or 40%. These percentages are automatically weighted to take into account the fact that the exact word is required.

[3]Kalish, Richard, Psychology of Human Behavior, Belmont, California, Brook/Cole Publishing Company, 1970

The cloze test is a quick and accurate method of determining the reading abilities of your students, and is an important diagnostic tool in your discipline. The cloze test procedure allows you to determine three student reading levels: 1) the independent level, 2) the instructional level, 3) the frustration level. Students reading above 57% can function well on the independent reading level and require very little additional help with the text. Students reading at the 44% - 57% are at the instructional reading level. The students who are reading at this level in assigned textbooks and readings will need additional help to decode the text. The frustration level occurs below 44 percentile and students at this level will have great difficulty in reading the text. If alternative text materials are not available these students will undoubtedly need private tutoring sessions in the course. A student is unable to benefit, let alone, comprehend a course when he cannot read the text. The disabled learner needs additional instruction from the professor if he is to succeed in the junior college.

Because most junior community colleges are open door institutions, many students will exhibit some limitations in the areas of basic skills. It will not be unusual for a large percentage of the students in any typical junior college course to be at the instructional level. These students can be taught how to read assigned textbooks and additional primary source readings. Once the professor is aware of the problem, the following techniques may be employed:

1. Students should be taught how to take notes, how to organize lecture material for main ideas, and how to ask for clarification about any confusing assignment.
2. All reading assignments should be specific and their purpose defined for the students. One of the primary reasons that students have difficulty reading is they do not fully understand the "raison d'etre" of the assignment.

Simply assigning pages is meaningless because the student does not know what is expected of him. Reading sheets can be provided by the instructor in which the purpose for each assignment is explicitly stated. Perhaps, these sheets could include study questions and instructions for reading the material. Three approaches of analysis could be: a) critical reading, b) reading for detailed information, and c) skimming and scanning.

3. Help the students acquire the necessary reading skills for the completion of the assignments. These skills may be grouped into the following four major areas:

a. Vocabulary. Teach your students that some words often used in ordinary conversation or composition may also carry technical or specialized meanings in each discipline. The study of technical vocabulary, as with any vocabulary study is retained if presented in context rather than in isolation; some examples will be necessary. Lists of words and their definitions are not easily remembered especially if they are not a part of the student's working vocabulary. The key to vocabulary is usage. New words should be presented in the context of student readings.

b. The survey technique. Most academic disciplines have unique patterns of communication, and many times one format exists for a majority of the books or articles written in the field. A student who can be taught to analyze the structure of the technical or specialized book can transfer this skill to other books within the discipline. Teaching students to analyze the structural framework of the text is best accomplished by having them preview its units or chapters.

c. Question technique. Text headings or subtitles can easily be converted into questions. The usual form of the questions that a student will develop as he proceeds through the survey, is "what do I expect to find in

A chapter on this topic, on this concept, on this method?" The next step in the process is to read the chapters thoroughly.

The purpose for reading is now meaningful to the student because he is looking for the answers to his own questions. This process will of course be easier for some students than for others. Some students spend too much time on details, while others miss important facts and concepts contained in the book. These students will need help developing the survey technique. Either small group discussions guided by "instructor provided" questions or individual tutoring may provide the catalyst for these students.

d. Paraphrase technique. The next step in the process is to teach the student how to paraphrase his reading material, especially when reading for detailed information. The student should paraphrase the meaning of a particular paragraph or section and, if possible, record this statement in a notebook. When reviewing the text, his paraphrased notes provide a method for checking his recall of material. If he can remember his own paraphrasing, he should mark it with an asterisk. In reviewing for a test, the student will realize that any unmarked sections need rereading and careful analysis.

Professors from all disciplines can help their students improve academically by employing the following techniques:

1. All reading assignments should be clear. The student should be specifically involved and the purpose of the assignment be stated.
2. All vocabulary (non-technical as well as technical) should be taught in context.
3. The writing style and intellectual structure of the discipline should be taught as a skill.
4. The selection of books must be based upon the professor's awareness that

there are varying abilities in the junior college student population. Finally, the community college has been called "democracy's college." Teachers at these institutions can be credited with enabling many students to succeed in divergent areas of today's society. Everyone can learn--the outstanding professor is interested in all students and can communicate a specific discipline by utilizing an individualized curriculum that includes the teaching of effective reading techniques.